DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 206 PS 030 180

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TITLE	Partnership for Leaving No Child Behind: Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige at the Conference of Chief State School Officers (Alexandria, Virginia, January 9, 2002).
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-01-09
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ED Pubs, P.O. Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398. Tel: 877-433-7827 (Toll Free); Fax: 301-470-1244; e-mail: edpubs@inet.ed.gov. For full text: http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/01-2002/20020109.html.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Change Strategies; *Educational Improvement; *Educational Policy; Federal Legislation; *Government Role; *Partnerships in Education
IDENTIFIERS	Department of Education; Paige (Roderick)

ABSTRACT

This pamphlet recounts remarks of Education Secretary Rod Paige at the opening of a meeting of chief state school officers. Drawing on the analogy of George Washington's friendships, the Secretary pledged the department's support and resources to the states but also the department's firm resolution in expecting compliance with President George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" education legislation. The Secretary also praised members of Congress for cooperation in enacting the legislation, and notes that the same spirit of bipartisanship will be critical to successful implementation. (HTH)

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Partnership for Leaving No Child Behind

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Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige

Conference of Chief State School Officers
January 9, 2002

Mount Vernon
Alexandria, Virginia

PS 030180

Partnership for Leaving No Child Behind

Remarks of
U.S. Secretary of Education
Rod Paige

In a 1790 letter, George Washington wrote, "I can truly say I had rather be at Mount Vernon with a friend or two about me, than to be attended at the seat of the government by the officers of State and the representatives of every power in Europe."

I would like to echo his sentiments. If I could be anywhere tonight, I would choose to be at Mount Vernon with my friends and colleagues, just as I am. As we relax here in the candlelight with the doors shut tight against the winter winds from the Potomac, it is easy to imagine the music of Nellie's harpsichord echoing through the house, mixing with the laughter of George and Martha entertaining friends after dinner.

To a great extent, we owe our liberty and our independence not to documents or elections but to the strong friendships forged in discussions at this house and others across the colonies.

The friendships among our founders were strong enough to beat an empire in war and preserve liberty in peace. And friendship was their theme when the sovereign states joined together in "a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare."

As we heard from Dr. Dressner, much American history was made at Mount Vernon, and we are gathered here to make even more.

As I said this afternoon, for America's children, the turn of the century came yesterday. When President Bush signed his No Child Left Behind bill into law, he made the federal government a strong ally of accountability, local communities and parents.

And so, on behalf of every boy and girl on the mountains and prairies of our republic, I want to wish all of you a happy new year.

Americans made great progress during the twentieth century. Our store of knowledge was increased by discoveries in science, medicine, astronomy, physics, archaeology and every other field. But we have failed to share our discoveries with everyone. We've gained knowledge but lost ground.

We can say that some of our children were better educated than the children that George and Martha Washington taught here at Mount Vernon. But educating some of our children is not enough. We built a brighter fire, but we left many children in the shadows. We must bring light to all who are in the house. And today we begin.

This will be a year of dramatic change. A river that had wandered sluggishly east has suddenly shifted and begun to flow west. Everyone involved in education—teachers and administrators, students and parents, business and community leaders—will notice the change, and the more we understand it, the more it will help us. The westward current will flow swiftly, and it will carry everyone along. Boats that had run aground

or been caught in the shallows will be shaken loose and brought back to midstream. Most important, the river and everyone on it will flow toward success.

I hope our journey will not be quite as perilous as that of General Washington crossing the Delaware River, but our victory will be just as important.

Tomorrow, we will discuss many of the provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act. We will talk about accountability, standards, assessment, flexibility, local control, adequate yearly progress, the requirement of a qualified teacher in every classroom, and many other topics.

I will not delve into those topics tonight, but I will make a few general observations.

The first is that this meeting is not a lecture but a discussion. If Rembrandt Peale's magnificent portrait of Washington could speak, the general would remind us that the federal government is an invention of the sovereign states, and that I am not your superior. I am your partner. I invited you here tonight not to give orders but to offer my help in a bold mission. In our discussion tomorrow, I hope you will talk more than I do.

Those of us from the Department of Education want to help you implement the act, and we want to hear about your needs, your concerns and your suggestions. I am serious about the partnership, and very sincere in the statement that we are in fact in this together. Our success is dependent on our partnership.

On the other hand, the time for objecting to the provisions in the act has passed. No Child Left Behind is now the law of the land. I took an oath to enforce the law, and I intend to do that.

I will help states and districts and schools comply – in fact I will do everything in my power to help – but I will not let deadlines slip or see requirements forgotten.

When students beg their teachers to extend deadlines, the choice between discipline and compassion can be very difficult. But if states ask me to extend deadlines, they will be asking me to make a choice between the needs of children and the flaws of the system.

Having been a teacher, a coach and a superintendent, I know my heart, and I can tell you that this will be an easy choice for me. When choosing between kids and the system, I choose the kids.

Young George Washington learned penmanship and manners by copying a Jesuit book on civility. The book advised, "Let your countenance be pleasant but in serious matters somewhat grave." The education of our children is both. It is a matter of grave consequence, but when done right it is also a pleasant task.

And if anyone comes to me to appeal for a waiver from the federal requirements, I hope to be very pleasant as I firmly say, "Not in this century. Not in this country."

When our country was much younger, as you know, we did not have political parties. Partisan divisions grew out of divisions in President Washington's cabinet, but Washington himself was above all that. Political parties certainly have their role, but we should never forget what their role is or allow things to become partisan that should not be.

We got to where we are because two parties learned to work together. Not necessarily on every issue, but they did work

together beautifully on education, after years of trying and failing. As you know, the 106th Congress had attempted to reauthorize the ESEA, and when partisan divisions grew too great they gave up.

This year, the attitude in the 107th Congress was entirely different, and so were the results. Many people credit the president for bringing a spirit of bipartisanship with him. Last weekend, he told some friends in Texas, "I went up to Washington with a wonderful sense of being able to get things done. I still believe that can happen. But sometimes Washington needs to figure out that politics is not what is most important; the people are what is most important."

He did make a great difference in Washington. But we should give equal credit to the members of Congress, in both parties and in both chambers, who put aside their animosities, their feuds and their personal interests, and came together to serve America. It was the patriotic spirit we saw on the evening of September 11th, when Democrats and Republicans in Congress gathered on the steps of the Capitol and sang "God Bless America" with one voice.

As a Republican, I want to emphasize especially the friendliness, the sincerity and the dedication of the Democrats with whom I worked during the last year.

Now that the bill is done, this spirit of bipartisanship will also be critical to our success in implementation. I know we have Republicans and Democrats here, and I know each of you is aware of the partisan dynamics of your own state. But cooperation is contagious, and I want to invite all of you to begin this task with a spirit of goodwill – the friendship that was built here at Mount Vernon.

When Maryland and Virginia had a dispute about the Potomac River, General Washington invited them to a meeting here at Mount Vernon to sit down together and work it out. Each of the 43 presidents of the United States except two has made a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon.

Tonight, the Department of Education convenes the education chiefs of the states for what is apparently the first time in the Department's history. I hope and expect that we will build relationships tomorrow that will ensure it will not be the last time we meet to help each other.

By his leadership and character, General Washington transformed a nation. Americans exchanged a Parliament across the ocean for the government in their own states, and in a new city that would bear Washington's name.

We too can transform a nation, and indeed it is our duty. The decisions and actions each of you make over the next few years, as well as the attitudes and expectations you inspire among the people around you, will make a great difference to the economy, society and liberty in your state. The work of all of you, taken as a whole, will affect our national security as well.

This is education's moment. For the first time in years, our two major parties are in agreement on education. Our scientists have reached a consensus on the best way to teach reading.

Our states—your states—are fertile grounds of innovation in the delivery of education—from homeschooling that President Washington would recognize to Internet classes that he could not comprehend. This is education's moment.

In his farewell address, President Washington warned against

"ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear." He was speaking about foreign policy, but now that we have been guests in his house, I suggest that we should take his counsel to heart in our own field.

America's children have brilliant potential, but they cannot reform their schools. They cannot hold their teachers accountable for results. They cannot make their teachers use teaching methods that work.

For these critical tasks, America's children depend on us. We must not thrust that burden onto our posterity. It is ours to bear. If we take it up cheerfully our yoke will be easy and our burden light. The rewards in student performance will make our labors worthwhile.

Across the water from the smoke of Ground Zero in Manhattan stands the famous statue "Liberty Enlightening the World." Liberty survived the attack on New York, and so did her light. Washington was correct when he wrote to Madison, "Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth."

It is the bright light of knowledge and the warm light of freedom. The glory of art, the radiance of history and the forge of science. The signal that called Paul Revere to his urgent ride and the lamp that will lead our grandchildren to undiscovered treasures. For centuries, the world has looked to our beacon of liberty for inspiration, guidance and hope, and it is our solemn charge to keep that light aloft. If we all work together to lift up every student, that beacon will enlighten the world forever.

Thank you.

U.S. Department of Education
Rod Paige
Secretary

Office of Public Affairs
Lindsey C. Kozberg
Director

January 2002

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